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# ETHICS AND THE MILITARY PROFESSION

NOVEMBER 1981

## ASSUMPTIONS

of the

## HONOR CONCEPT

Do you believe that...

*"the right motivation is the essential element of honor?"*

Or, that...

*"good acts and consequences are the essential elements of honor?"*

Can these views be reconciled?

How are these views important to the professional soldier?

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## CHARTER

In April 1978 the United States Military Academy's Committee on Ethics and Professionalism began its publication of Ethics and the Military Profession. Since that first issue, the publication has presented topics such as "The NCO and the Professional Ethic," "Sports and the Military," and "Values and the Professional Soldier." The purpose of this journal is the stimulation of dialogue and research among West Point Staff and Faculty in topics that would assist in the integration of Ethics and Professionalism courses with the cadet experience. This is a tall order for an extracurricular effort. But the issues that we, as officers and NCO's, as role models for the cadets, discuss in and out of class do affect the cadet experience. These issues offer a target of opportunity that should not be ignored. If this publication can offer issues for discussion that are currently or inherently interesting to our audience, then this publication is likely to be read. Further, since the methods with which those issues are analyzed are those that we use as professionals in the unit or at the office, the articles in Ethics and the Military Profession are as suited to an officer from a staff agency, DPE, or Math because they are responsible, informed people as they are suitable to an instructor in DMI, BS&L, or English who is charged with the instruction of specific ethical systems. There are no experts in this field, or, rather, we are all experts in this field. These periodical offerings should be read critically; they are not statements of policy that require some acceptance. Each publication will offer a feature article, a book review, and a bibliography. Taken together these sections should provide several perspectives to the topic of that publication. There will also be a listing of scheduled events which are of interest to the topics of Ethics and Professionalism.

## EVENTS

The following events contain material that is of professional and ethical interest.

1 DEC  
(alternate date 9 Dec)

President Gerald Ford, Capstone Speaker, Class of 1951 Lecture Seminar (AI 479)

7 DEC

Mr. Ted Weber, Emory University, Morality and American Foreign Policy (HI 378)

4 MAR

Professor Bernard Gert, Dartmouth College, "The Golden Rule and The Ten Commandments" (PY 2G1)

## FOCUS

There is a piece of common wisdom that says each man is three people: the one he thinks he is, the one other people think he is, and the one he really is. While this piece of apocrypha is not likely to disturb the knowledge gained by or the methods of disciplines such as ethics, behavioral science, or management that seek to apply their theoretical standards in a practical world, it can serve as a reminder to us that sweeping judgments go wrong because they do not consider all the pertinent facts.

The review of The Officers' Wives in this issue considers this problem of judgments taken from biased information. MAJ Ricks states in his review that the reader of this novel is likely to see the real Army in considerable distortion because the reader must look through the filters provided by this novel. We of the Army community would hope that no one would judge the honor of our friends and their families on such evidence because that is not what we really are. But when honor becomes the topic, finding a universally accepted view of the reality of honor is impossible, and so we may be left without a persuasive argument that easily refutes the distorted view.

This inability to form a persuasive rebuttal does not mean, however, that we are wrong. Questions of honor, like questions of self-identity, require an examination of fundamental questions. Is honor an item of the practical and public domain? Or, is honor private and thus impervious to practical considerations? Can we draw a line between these two polar positions and set the reality of honor somewhere between the two? Or must a third dimension be drawn to encompass the reality of honor?

→ This issue of the Ethics and the Military Profession makes a modest attempt to consider the multiple and often conflicting demands of honor. The topic is admittedly difficult and open-ended, but it is of vital interest to us as professionals and as the instructors of future professionals. Since the purpose of this journal is the discussion of issues that will promote the integration of ethics and professionalism, your response to this issue and suggestions for further discussion are welcomed. Please send your comments, ideas for articles, or potential articles to the Editor, MAJ John Reitz, Department of English.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS OF THE HONOR CONCEPT

by

Major John W. Reitz

The Profession of Arms demands men and women of honor. There is good reason for this demand. The effective officer must meet stringent standards to embody the honor of his or her office. Though honor is a commonly expressed and highly valued label, the concept of honor necessary to commissioned service in the United States Army is difficult to articulate. But this difficulty in articulating a concept of honor that is necessary and sufficient to the demands of commissioned service can be resolved. This resolution requires a recognition of the fact that an officer must value two forms of honor, external honor and internal honor; these forms may be further clarified by use of the terms honorable reputation and honorable commitment. This resolution requires further the concomitant recognition of the connection between these two distinct and coexistent forms. Any attempt to develop our appreciation of the honor concept that we hope to instill in potential officers assumes that the honorable reputations of the potential officers are *prima facie* evidence of their honorable commitment. This attempt assumes further that the honorable commitment is the first principle of the honorable person.

These assumptions are so basic that we rarely if ever consider them as assumptions, much less question them. In most of his actions, an officer can act as if honorable reputation and honorable commitment are not distinct elements of honor at all. The officer can act out of good intentions, select an appropriate act, and be confident that his action will be perceived as honorable. But this simple connection of action and consequences is not always reliable. When a situation offers the possibility of misinterpretation, an officer must choose his actions carefully. When forced to calculate the consequences of various honorable actions that carry varying potentials for misperception on one hand and personal benefit on the other hand, an officer will find the distinction between an honorable reputation and an honorable commitment useful in the attempt to resolve issues that might otherwise be obscured.

To illustrate the utility of a dual-based concept of honor, consider the hypothetical situation in which an officer may need to inconvenience himself to project an honorable reputation even though he can still act in accordance with the "spirit" of an honorable commitment without that inconvenience.

For example, a platoon leader might discover that one of his soldiers who is competing for Soldier of the Month is also good at fixing foreign sports cars. The lieutenant has an MG with chronic carburetor problems. While there is an MG mechanic in town, that mechanic is expensive. But, hearing about that expense, the soldier volunteers to adjust the lieutenant's carburetor for free. The lieutenant, who would like to avoid the costly repair bill, thinks he can accept the soldier's offer and still maintain a proper senior-subordinate relationship with the soldier. The soldier expects no favors. He just enjoys fixing cars and would like to help another sports car owner. The other soldiers in the platoon who are also competing for soldier of the month consider their fellow soldier's offer an attempt to gain favor.

This lieutenant may create a problem for himself if he does not recognize the distinction between an honorable reputation and an honorable commitment. The lieutenant may assume that if he acts with an honorable intent and an honorable motivation, then he will be perceived as honorable. He could judge this situation and determine that his honor requires him to remain impartial and honest with the soldiers of his platoon. Given this situation and these two standards of honor alone, the lieutenant could reasonably decide to accept the soldier's offer.

Suppose that lieutenant does indeed use the volunteer work, and suppose further that the soldier wins Soldier of the Month; a likely result is that the soldiers not selected will pounce upon that apparent conflict of interest. Those disappointed soldiers might claim that the lieutenant is paying his "mechanic" back. The lieutenant can claim innocence, but the perception would remain that the lieutenant was not innocent.

The issues become confused and delicate as soon as the lieutenant's honor is challenged. The lieutenant is apt to become defensive and emotional when the charge of favoritism is brought into the open. He knows perhaps that his action looks questionable, but these are his troops, so he thinks they should give him their trust. He is honorable, he reasons, and the troops should be able to see that. The troops, on the other hand, are unlikely to be swayed by the lieutenant's claim. After all, they could reason that if he is being partial, he is not likely to admit it. The controversy between lieutenant and troops could continue on this superficial level without a resolution because each side would feel justified in its stand.

Although each side of this controversy has a valid point, there is a need to resolve the controversy for the good of the unit. The lieutenant, as the leader of this group, is also responsible to find a way to resolve the issue. The lieutenant should become aware that the reality of his being honorable is important but so too is the appearance of his honor. Any approved solution must include two elements: sustain the lieutenant's motivation to be honorable, and restore the perception of his honor among the troops. Although the solution could contain many desirable elements, these are the two elements that are necessary to the demands of honorable service. To be honorable it is necessary for the officer not only to choose honorable actions but also to project an honorable image.

The service demands that an officer be honorable. One reason for this demand is its utility. An officer must hold the trust of those around him to do his job. This is a special demand that is not made in many occupations. We do not make the special demand that a gardener be honorable. This does not mean, of course, that gardeners are not honorable. It means only that being honorable is not an essential part of being a gardener. There are occupations, however, where that element of honor is essential. We make a special demand of doctors, lawyers, and clergymen to meet certain ethical standards. This same special demand is made of Army officers.

This requirement for honor in a professional can best be understood by a shift in perspective. The professional must project an image of honor because that honorable image creates trust for the professional with those people who depend upon him. Thus, the concern in this perspective is with the perception of honor; the concern is with the audience and not the actor.

The concern with the audience indirectly leads to the responsibility a professional has to his or her profession. A doctor represents the medical profession when he treats a patient. The lieutenant represents the officer corps as he leads his soldiers. The audience expects the individual who accepts the responsibility of a profession to meet the special demands of that profession, but the audience also

evaluates the profession with each professional they observe. Thus, if the lieutenant weakens his good name, he also weakens the good name of the officer corps in general. A professional may be said to act as a representative of his profession as well as himself.

The fact that professionals meet their honorable responsibilities imperfectly can hardly be a surprise in our imperfect world. Suppose a poll finds that 85% of the lawyers in one city observe a particular ethical standard. The standard can then be supported as a descriptive claim. This form of evidence describes standards that may be considered valid on the basis of actual compliance, but a descriptive analysis of honorable standards may be too lax. Standards of honor established as special demands for a professional should be normative. A normative standard remains valid even when that standard lacks descriptive support. For example, cheating on income tax (normative claim) is wrong even if the majority of taxpayers are cheating on the payment of their income tax (descriptive claim).

The special demand for trust as an essential tribute for certain professionals results from both normative and descriptive concerns. The first concern is normative. A doctor ought to inspire trust because he deals with the health and lives of his patients. An Army officer ought to inspire trust because he deals with the security and defense of the nation. This standard of trust transcends the realities of the job and particular people. That is, it extends to the whole profession which each professional represents. But the other implicit concern is descriptive. Not only do we expect a doctor to be trustworthy in a normative sense, but we also demand that trustworthiness in a descriptive sense. This descriptive sense becomes a tangle of perceptions, rumors, and reputations. To observe that a doctor with a successful practice has many patients who use his services because the patients feel that he is highly qualified may accurately describe the cause of the patients' behavior, but this observation is not sufficient proof of his qualifications on a normative basis. On the other hand, a doctor who cannot get patients to come to him cannot do his job regardless of his qualifications. For example, a doctor who has a reputation for performing needless, expensive surgery will lose the future business of many patients. The loss of patients results directly from the mistrust those patients have for the doctor. Their mistrust probably is the result of descriptive events that are more suitable to behavioral analysis than to normative ethical analysis, but the facts of their mistrust, however unfounded in terms of valid ethical behavior, still exist and must be dealt with.

The presence of this need to create trust is true not only for a doctor but also for an Army officer, a lawyer, and other professionals. The lieutenant needs to act in such a way that his soldiers trust him so he too can do his job. If the soldiers do not trust him because they feel he plays favorites, they may retaliate by doing as little as possible. Those soldiers might also hide problems that would otherwise be taken to the lieutenant. A junior officer who lacks the ability to motivate his subordinates or who lacks the ability to respond to their problems does not possess a fundamental skill of the junior leader. This trust is a behavioral necessity for the professional.

The honorable reputation also recognizes the practical necessity of trust, but it does so as a normative demand. This normative demand has a definite relationship with the behavioral aspect of trust. Both aspects of trust refer to a result: the creation (or maintenance) of enough trust for the professional to do his job. As a platoon leader, the lieutenant ought to create an environment of trust that permits him to do his job. That lieutenant may use any number of behavioral patterns to arrive at that trust. The normative demand refers to the consequence and not the

method. If accepting the help of the soldier mechanic adversely affects his performance of duty by fouling the environment of trust, then the action is wrong according to a normative standard of the honorable reputation.

The standard imposed by the honorable reputation is flexible, however, compared to that of the honorable commitment. The honorable reputation looks toward a result that synthesizes many elements. The honorable reputation sets a standard of successful results: a doctor ought to do what he is expected to do in a proper way. A professional has knowledge, a method, and the individual skill to apply those elements to the benefit of society. When the professional goes about his tasks with a high degree of practical success and no glaring deficiencies, his honor is not called into question. The honorable reputation uses empirical evidence: specific results achieved. The evaluation that follows one's honorable commitment, on the other hand, does not use empirical evidence to support its judgments. Where there is room to shape elements of the honorable reputation to meet the descriptive demands of the working place, there can be no appropriate variation of the honorable commitment.

The honorable commitment enables a person to live up to the "special trust" mentioned in the officer's commission. The focus in this form of honor is on the actor; the audience that was important to the honorable reputation is irrelevant to this concern. Instead of assessing the action and its results, the honorable commitment assesses the motivation and the class of action. An officer who has an honorable commitment does not need the threat of punishment or the promise of a better reputation to act honorably. This officer would perform his or her duties alone properly because failure to do so would be inconsistent with his or her personal standards. Although these standards may range from those of individual honesty to particular organizational precepts, their importance to the actor transcends external concerns. The actor has internalized these standards.

The honorable commitment is the first principle of honor in any professional. The honorable commitment may be the necessary and sufficient condition for honorable action; the adequacy of this sole condition is a practical necessity for society when the professional acts alone. It was this sense of honor upon which the lieutenant in the hypothetical example relied. He intended to act honorably. If he was wrong in his action, we blame him for his judgment of the situation and not for his willful failure to act upon an honorable commitment. As the example also suggests, though the presence of an honorable commitment is a necessary condition, it is not always sufficient. The lieutenant should amend the appearance or form of his action to conform to the intent of his actions. Although his reasons for action were consistent with the honorable commitment, the lieutenant acted in a way that was inconsistent with the honorable reputation.

The importance of the connections between honorable reputation and honorable commitment does not end with the claim that both elements are sometimes required from an officer who is honorable. The lieutenant should defend his claim to honor because that defense would give *prima facie* evidence that he values his honor. So too, does the honorable reputation give *prima facie* evidence of the honorable commitment. We would like to say that our acting honorably, or our doing the right thing is sufficient evidence to conclude that we are also acting from the right reason. As a theory, this assumption that the outward actions accurately reflect internal commitments is attractive because it is simple and plausible. But the connection between these two elements is more than just a theory; that connection is customary. We make the claim that "actions speak louder than words" in many ways. In a practical world our actions speak for us; these actions are the only evidence available of our intentions. So we accept the assumption that outward actions correspond with internal commitments as rational and practical. It does not seem reasonable that a professional could fabricate an honorable reputation without a concomitant honorable commitment. Perhaps such negative examples are the exceptions which prove the rule. Such proof could be valid when the broken rule is a normative standard that reaffirms its value on the condemnation of those who willfully break that standard.

Let it be taken as an assumption for the sake of this argument that a person without an honorable commitment could maintain an honorable reputation. This person accomplishes the results that are expected of him or her in the way that is expected, but he or she does it for the wrong reason. Suppose a county official spent twenty years of effective and apparently honorable service waiting for that one zoning change from which he could make a million dollars by using privileged information for self gain. What evidence of this character flaw can be found? The answer is none. There is no empirical evidence available, nor can there be, that any person has a certain motivation or intent. Public officials, however, who are predisposed to cheat or otherwise act dishonorable are not likely to hide that predisposition for twenty years. The ability to hide a motivation to self gain at public expense over an extended period while acting all that time in the public interest is logically inconsistent. This claim can be extended to other elements of the honorable reputation. Thus, we would judge a person capable of fostering an honorable reputation for an extended time without a concomitant honorable commitment as irrational, and this judgment allows us to dismiss this possibility because we hold as a prior and necessary assumption that professional people are rational.

Again for the sake of argument consider another assumption. The presence of an honorable reputation is sufficient evidence of the honorable commitment. Anytime a professional or public official accomplishes good ends the right way, he or she can be assumed to have acted out of the proper motivation. A doctor cures patients because she is concerned for their health, not a fee. A general fights a battle because he is committed to the defense of the nation, not to attaining personal glory. Assuming that the proper action reflects the proper inner standard allows society to justify giving professionals positions of "special trust" on the basis of their past performances. The lieutenant in the hypothetical example, on the other hand, has not given *prima facie* evidence of his honest action and impartiality. Society must use the available facts about how particular persons performed past obligations as sufficient evidence to predict that those persons will meet or exceed the normative demands in the future. Thus, consistent past performance is *prima facie* evidence of the honorable commitment.

The lieutenant's difficulty in displaying his honorable commitment without a concomitant honorable reputation suggests another good reason to assume that the honorable reputation is sufficient evidence of the honorable commitment. It is the only evidence available to support the assumption that another person has an honorable commitment. The lieutenant may be ready to act honestly and impartially alone, but he is not working alone. Since his honesty and impartiality are necessary to his job, he must amend his actions to demonstrate those qualities in an unequivocal way to his soldiers, for that is the only method by which they can come to know that those qualities exist in the lieutenant.

The argument for the connection between honorable reputation and honorable commitment as necessary and sufficient conditions in the honor of a professional finally arrives at this focus. When a professional is given a position of "special trust," he or she offers an honorable reputation as proof that the "special trust" is deserved. This proof, however, is indirect because the honorable commitment is the first principle and necessary condition that guarantees individual compliance to the elements of that "special trust," not the honorable reputation. But the assumption that an honorable reputation reflects the presence of the honorable commitment not only allows society to arrive indirectly at judgments of what is otherwise an unknowable entity, but it also allows society to use empirical evidence that can be known with certainty. Examples of fraud or professional misconduct are damaging. These examples, however, neither alter the need to assume the presence of the honorable

commitment, nor should they alter the validity of the assumption. The lieutenant in the hypothetical case can be encouraged to keep his honorable commitment at the same time he is counseled to modify his activities to produce an honorable reputation.

Army officers should profit from recognizing the dualistic nature of the concept of honor, but the recognition will not answer all questions about honor. The discussion of honorable reputation and honorable commitment does not identify specific values or standards. The discussion also avoids theories of moral development that would nurture the specific values or standards. But before some of these specifics are advanced as the specific ethical standards for a United States Army Officer, the nature and relationship of honor to the individual and to those who work with him or her must be understood.

THE OFFICERS' WIVES

By Thomas Fleming, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1981. 645 pages. \$15.95.

Reviewed by Major Charles W. Ricks, Instructor, Department of English, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York. This review originally appeared in the June 1981 issue of Assembly.

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Whenever taken to task for any of a variety of social problems, the military claims, quite correctly, that such criticism must be tempered by an awareness of the military's role in American society. The fact is that the military draws much of its character from the society it represents. So it is that many of the significant changes in the ways of military life since World War II reflect the tumultuous changes wrought upon American society. In his newest novel, *The Officers' Wives*, Thomas Fleming considers several familiar contemporary themes, brought with skill into the world of the military. The results are often uncomfortable.

Using fictitious members of the USMA Class of 1950 as points of focus, Mr. Fleming ranges across the political and military history of the past thirty years. We meet Peter MacArthur Burke, a combat veteran of the Korean conflict and of seemingly countless back-to-back tours in Vietnam. He turns down Pentagon assignments and war college training to stay in Vietnam and gain what he sees as the final victory. Burke's roommate is Adam Thayer (nicknamed "Supe"), whose often indiscreet criticism of Army policy in Southeast Asia overshadows his accomplishments under fire and results in his eventual banishment to menial positions. George Rosser, the unobtrusive political member of the group, completes the trio of major male characters.

Yet *The Officers' Wives* is more a story of the women than of the men. In some written comments about the work, Mr. Fleming notes that social contact with Army wives in the mid-1960's led him to the realization that "the wives had almost as many stories to tell as the men." His decision to present the military experience from the perspective of the Army wife gives a special view of what it is to be in the military. The reader experiences war, professional intrigue, and personal ambition through the eyes of the women, the Army wives. As readers, we are usually set apart from the actual events and see them only through feminine "filters."

From this unique perspective, the reader views the wrenching loss of idealism and innocence which is the heritage of post World-War-II America. In flashback fashion, we see the Class of 1950 graduate under a canopy of bright, ideal hope, only to face the sudden recall from blissful honeymoons as the Korean War erupts. The optimism of June Week and its affirmation of DUTY, HONOR, AND COUNTRY crumble bit by bit into the confusion and disillusionment of the 1960's and 1970's. It is wrong to say that the novel stands without hope, but characters survive only when they have been brutalized into the realization that time-worn beliefs have become useless platitudes. While engaged in a passionate rendezvous with Mrs. Peter Burke, Adam Thayer speaks of lost hope and desolation as he mourns, "So here we are, without honor, without country, without any particular reason for duty."

Just who are Mrs. Peter Burke and the other officers' wives? We see them as women trapped within a system they do not entirely understand and for which they have, at best, mixed loyalties because of their alienation from their husbands. Joanna Burke is one whose spiritual beliefs and emotional fortitude are challenged and slowly ground away. Honor Prescott Thayer, a ravishing southern beauty, is

completely alienated from her husband, her children, and her mother. She is alone, set apart. Amy Rosser knows that she wants to be a general's wife, and she "plays the game" vigorously to ensure her goal. Yet she too is separated from her husband, a realization she comes to when she hears of his unexpected heroism as a battalion commander during the Tet Offensive of 1968.

This is not a traditional novel about heroes; it is, instead a tale of survivors, and in our admiration for those survivors we see a complex reaffirmation of Duty, Honor, and Country. Even the cynical Adam Thayer pursues his brand of loyalty to the Army and to his country, and is remembered, in the words of a classmate, as "Out of control . . . But still ours." Honor, as with its feminine namesake, is assaulted and often almost lost. Yet, with perseverance, it survives in the efforts of those who refuse to give up entirely on its value. Constitutionally, the country is sound. Yet the novel paints a portrait of an army separated from the nation it is sworn to defend. We see a fighting force assaulted at home and overseas, an institution with no place to rest. This condition persists, though it may find some measure of resolution in the flag-draped coffin of the non-conforming Adam Thayer.

How well do the Army wives fare in this examination of their role? Not always very well; nor, I fear, does the Army in general. They are often portrayed as petty and conniving. For several years in the mid-1960s, Mr. Fleming worked out of the Hotel Thayer as he researched the history of West Point [West Point, Morrow, 1969]. He acknowledges the contribution of social contacts made during that time to the formation of *The Officers' Wives*. So however Mr. Fleming saw the Army through the eyes of his hosts, the general reader will see it one more layer removed. Therein lies the possibility for considerable distortion.

For example, reviews about the novel note that Americans can now see how the Army really is. Comments printed in the "Book-of-the-Month Club News" record that *The Officers' Wives* reveals an "obsessive dependence on alcohol; the cunning exploitation of loci of power; the insulation from normal American Society . . . and, above all, the pathetic macho tradition making nasty children out of mature males and inflicting on their mates a loss of identity." Though only the Army's most naive commentators would deny the existence of real instances of those maladies, Fleming would surely hope for a less categorical response from his readers. Nevertheless, he has written a novel encouraging the literal reader to see an Army where the sole motivation seems to be the "ticket-punch" and where surreptitious phone calls among wives control the Army's system of assignments. It is a shame that the siren song of the bestseller list drew Fleming to create fiction that sometimes is simply untrue and hence decidedly misleading.

Be prepared to be angry, hurt, and even betrayed by what you read. But, also, be prepared on occasion to see your classmates, your colleagues, your adversaries, and, if you allow, yourself.

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